

Making the Most of Your Law Firm Experience

On Friday April 9th 1999, Leona Vogt, a highly regarded legal career consultant in the Boston area, shared with us her thoughts on "making the most of your law firm experience". Her presentation was packed with insightful career advice for associates who are planning to stay as well as associates who are planning to leave their firms.

Leona Vogt began her discussion by identifying two problems with the methods that law firms use to evaluate associates. First she noted that in many large firms, associates are given no formal feedback until months after they join the firm. Second, she noted that it is difficult to find objective performance measures in the [practice of law](#).

Don't Assume that No News is Good News

Leona noted that most associates err in assuming that no news is good news. She advised the audience that it is important to get informal feedback early and often from partners or senior associates (e.g. after a transaction has been completed). Leona also gave warning about the proper way to behave if a partner is legitimately dissatisfied with the associate's performance. She commented that it is a bad strategy to avoid a partner after doing an assignment improperly. She suggested that the better approach is to acknowledge the mistake and actively try to get more work from that partner. In her view, the last memory is the memory that will stick with the partner (i.e. it doesn't matter if the 4 previous memos were flawless). So it is important to fix the "damage".

For Associates Planning to Leave

Leona gave some advice to associates planning to leave their firm. While the natural tendency is to focus one's energy outside the firm once a decision to leave has been made, Leona suggested that the better practice is to decide what kind of work you want to do next and to get more of that work at your present firm. Companies want to hire employees who already have the needed experience (this is particularly true in lateral associate hiring). She also spoke about the tension between being a generalist and a specialist particularly if you want to go in-house. Her suggestion was to become a specialist in a particular industry (i.e. learn the language they speak so clients will think that you understand them) rather than a specialist in a particular area of the law.

And for Laterals Joining a New Firm

When joining a firm as a lateral, Leona suggested that doing good work is of course important, but that it is equally important to be political (paying particular attention to the political alliances that you form). It is great to cultivate relationships with wonderful people, but make sure to also cultivate relationships with others if these partners have no clout. She also discussed the importance of taking responsibility for your own professional development (i.e. don't be like the associate who complained "no one was there to protect me. No one was there to give me advice.") and the importance of developing soft skills including: 1) effective communication (being able to give good feedback above and below), 2) time management, 3) working effectively with clients (e.g. anticipating client needs by asking the client a lot of questions before giving advice) and 4) being a self starter.

Dealing With the Difficult Supervisor

Leona Vogt briefly addressed the issue of dealing with the "supervisor from hell". She indicated that complaining is not an effective strategy. Rather it is best to find out what really gets the supervisor going and to try to avoid that behavior (unless the person is truly sadistic and there is no way to avoid incurring his

wrath). Another survival strategy she suggested was to load up on work from others even when you're busy with a matter assigned by this partner. That way you can honestly say you're busy when they come to call on you for the next project.

Career Transitions

In making a career transition, Leona advised associates in the room to focus on their passions rather than their skills. She suggested a number of exercises to help identify one's calling. One exercise she suggested was to keep a journal, writing down what are the good days at work (and what were the activities) and what are the bad days at work. Another exercise she suggested involves finding a handful of people who know you well (e.g. a spouse or significant other). Ask these individuals what they think your core strengths are and ask them to provide examples. Then ask them where they think you would shine and why. Finally, Leona identified ways to establish credibility in the subject area that is of interest to you (i.e. the kind of work that you would like to do but are not doing). She suggested writing articles on the subject that you want to be identified with. Another suggestion was to volunteer for activities outside of the firm that are related to that subject (particularly high profile activities). Another approach is to convince your firm to let you do some of this work (e.g. by creating a practice area). The example given was a second year associate at Hill and Barlow who convinced the firm to let her form an equestrian law group so that she could connect with her interest in horses. Initially the associate took on the work above and beyond her normal workload.